

FAST FACTS

Anxiety: Everything from fast facts to getting help

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a future-oriented emotion, marked by negative anticipation of upcoming events. While others may describe this as fear, anxiety and fear are different: fear is an emotional response to a real or perceived imminent threat. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), while it can sometimes overlap with anxiety, fear often is more associated with “flight or fight” mode, thoughts of immediate danger, or escape behaviors. Anxiety, on the other hand, is “more often associated with muscle tension and vigilance in preparation for future danger and cautious or avoidant behaviors.”

Anxiety is among the most common mental health disorders in the U.S., affecting 40 million adults ages 18 and older (or 18.1% of the population each year according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America) and 25.1% of children between 13 and 18 years old. While highly treatable, only 36.9% of those suffering receive adequate treatment (ADAA).

What Causes Anxiety?

There is no one cause for anxiety, but it can often arise from a combination of risk factors, including:

- **Genetics:** Researchers have found that people who develop anxiety disorders before the age of 20 are more likely to have close relatives with anxiety disorders.
- **Brain Chemistry:** Other studies have shown that stress can change the chemical balance in the brain, thereby affecting mood.
- **Personality:** Certain personality traits, including high neuroticism and low extraversion can be linked to certain anxiety disorders.
- **Life Events:** There is also a lot of research to suggest that anxiety is related to traumatic life events. One study from the University of Liverpool even suggests that traumatic life events are the biggest cause of anxiety (as well as depression).

Types of Anxiety

There are several different types of diagnosable anxiety, each with its own definition and symptoms. The most common anxiety disorders, as categorized by the current DSM, include:

- Generalized Anxiety Disorder
- Social Anxiety Disorder
- Separation Anxiety Disorder
- Panic Disorder

- Specific Phobias (including Agoraphobia)
- Selective Mutism
- Substance or Medication-Induced Anxiety Disorder
- Anxiety Disorder Due to Another Medical Condition
- Unspecified Anxiety Disorder

ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION

As the ADAA notes, the link between anxiety and depression is common. Nearly 50% of those diagnosed with depression are also diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. It's important to note, however, that depression and anxiety disorders — while linked — are different in terms of symptoms and causes.

ANXIETY AND PANIC

Similar to anxiety and depression, anxiety and panic attacks are linked but not necessarily one and the same. Panic attacks are a common fear response in anxiety disorders, but can also be symptomatic of other mental disorders.

ANXIETY AND STRESS

Much like fear, stress is a response to a situation or threat in our lives. Anxiety, as ADAA notes, is the response to that stress. It's normal to feel stressed or even anxious at certain points in our lives. Understanding how one feeds into the other can also be helpful in reducing both.

Anxiety Symptoms

Anxiety can take a physical toll on you and your relationships and manifests itself in different ways for different people, including through motor tension, autonomic hyperactivity, and/or hypervigilance. Other common symptoms of anxiety, according to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), include:

- Feeling restless, wound-up, or on-edge
- Trouble sleeping or sleeping well
- Being easily fatigued
- Having difficulty concentrating or feeling like your mind has “gone blank”
- Irritability
- Muscle tension
- Difficulty controlling feelings of worry

Most of these symptoms are common for those without a diagnosed anxiety disorder. The difference between simply feeling anxious and having generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is that many of these symptoms persist for at least 6 months on a near-daily basis.

Other disorders carry other specific symptoms. More information can be found on the NIMH's page on Anxiety Disorders.

Anxiety Treatment and Prevention

Anxiety is highly treatable through a variety of interventions, including Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, mindfulness meditation, and exposure therapy.

- Focusing on your breathing to find a place of calm can help minimize anxious sensations.
- Maintaining healthy and regular sleep patterns can help prevent anxious episodes.
- Talking to your general physician is a great way to learn more about how you are feeling and options around managing your mental wellness.